

CHAPTER 10:

Final Reflections: Emerging Policy Issues

Recent cross-national studies (EIU, 2012; European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/Eurostat, 2014; OECD, 2012b; Pascal et al., 2012) have revealed that many countries have, or are developing, a funded, government-led, ECE policy with stated aims and intentions. Research indicates an emerging consensus that broad policy aims and strategies for ECE should be set by government policy to stimulate further development and improvement of ECE systems (EIU, 2012; European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/Eurostat, 2014; OECD, 2012b). Today, many governments see ECE as a public investment with huge returns, and are making considerable effort to support the development of ECE as an effective tool to help children build a strong foundation for school and life success and, therefore, better life chances, especially for children from disadvantaged and migrant backgrounds, and children with special needs or disabilities. However, despite shared policy intentions, these recent studies also reveal that countries are at very different stages of policy development and implementation, and may have adopted different strategies to achieve the shared goal of an affordable, accessible and effective ECE system.

As countries worldwide continue to work at ECE system development, and policy options continue to be debated, the need to document and evaluate alternative systems, policy choices and their consequences, has become more important. The ECES aims to contribute to this reflective and evaluative process, and provides detailed, cross-national information from eight countries with the intention of supporting the wider development of ECE policy and practice. The study provides contextual evidence on the structural and systemic characteristics of the ECE and care systems in each participating country, captures in-country and between-country variations in policy and systems, and documents key policy changes underway and planned. As Dr Hans Wagemaker, former IEA Executive Director, stated:

“Each country faces its own particular challenges toward achieving an equitable, high-quality early childhood education system. [...] ECES will enable countries to thoughtfully examine their own goals and policies in this critical area, and to learn from each other’s best practices.”

(International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement, 2013)

Documenting current ECE policy aims and strategies in a range of countries which exemplify different policy approaches can help to explain the orientation of ECE services and give a wider perspective to the development of ECE systems. This final chapter of the policy report sets out to provide a critical reflection on the key policy issues and questions that flow from the main findings in the eight study countries, highlighting how these policy findings support or differ from other recent cross-national policy studies. It is hoped that the key policy issues identified will provide an agenda for policymakers and providers to consider as they continue to move their ECE systems forward.

The policy analysis within and between the eight study countries has highlighted a number of questions and issues that may be of particular interest to ECE policymakers. These issues or questions are to be found in each of the five aspects of policy implementation addressed in the data discussed in previous chapters, and are set out below.

Public Policy

Cross-national studies (EIU, 2012; European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/Eurostat, 2014; OECD, 2012b; Pascal et al., 2012) have consistently argued that public policy should support the development of an ECE system that ensures access and entitlement to a high quality service for all children from birth to the start of primary schooling. To ensure a certain length of participation in ECE programs, countries often provide legal entitlements to ensure access to affordable, high-quality ECE. The OECD (2012a) study found that many countries have started to offer “free” ECE services (i.e., free at the point of delivery) to certain age groups, usually one or two years before the start of compulsory schooling and some countries have extended this right to cover younger children as well. The OECD study also found that some countries have moreover extended the duration of ECE by lowering the age of compulsory education. They point out that this is often considered an effective option from an equity point of view, as inequalities are likely to exist before schooling starts and tend to grow when school is not compulsory. The European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/Eurostat (2014) data also indicated that most European countries have committed themselves to providing an ECE place for all children, either by establishing a legal entitlement to ECE or making attendance compulsory for at least the last pre-primary year. However, few European countries guarantee every child an early place in ECE directly following parental leave.

The countries in the ECES reflect a similar developmental journey and were each at a different stage in the development of their ECE system, with some countries having well developed systems with legal entitlements from an early age and others putting in place statutory entitlements in the year or two before primary schooling. Development and change in ECE public policy was underway in most countries.

Policy Issue 1

ECE is undergoing a period of rapid and significant development and requires continuing policy attention and investment.

The majority of the participating countries in the ECES research have recently undergone, or have planned for the near future, significant structural and systemic changes in their ECE policy, at both ECED and PPE levels. The findings illustrate the dynamic nature of ECE policy, and reflect the growing visibility and importance attached to the development of the ECE as a significant part of the educational and social systems within the study countries. However, the continued complexity of the sector and the diversity of providers and funding mechanisms compared with that found at later stages in the education system make the policy challenges during this phase very different and the change agenda very complex. The changes also indicate that, in many of the study countries, over recent years there has been a significant increase in expenditure on ECE services to support the development of ECE infrastructure, services, and the development of quality. This attention and investment needs to be maintained.

The Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU, 2012), OECD (2012a), The World Bank (2013), and European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/Eurostat (2014) all promote ECE as critical to smart and sustainable growth, the development of stable and equitable societies, and to long-term economic prosperity. The ECES confirms that governments across the world are recognizing the value of ECE as a key social, educational, economic and civic lever, and are investing in its development to secure benefits in all these domains.

Policy Issue 2

Multiple policy aims for ECE are common and reveal the potential value and impact of quality ECE, but they can sometimes compete or conflict with each other.

The ECES research data on stated public policy aims and strategies for ECE reveal that governments in the eight participating countries recognize the value of ECE and are using it as a key tool to help them meet multiple policy agendas. The study countries indicated a wide range of policy aims for ECE, which include aims to support parental employment and training, aims to support a child's development and learning, aims that address wider social and civic issues, and aims which support early intervention for language needs or special needs. This suggests that ECE policy is being used to meet a spectrum of social, economic, educational and political demands in all eight study countries. It does, however, mean that sometimes these different policy aims can compete and conflict with each other.

Public spending on ECE is important as, without sufficient public spending, there is a greater risk that access to ECE programs will be restricted to affluent families and, therefore, that the quality of the programs will vary. Evidence from OECD (2012a) and European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/Eurostat (2014) shows that there are substantial differences in ECE expenditure among countries. The studies also reveal that publicly-funded ECE tends to be more prevalent in the European than in non-European OECD countries. The extent of private funding also varies widely between countries. In countries where public funding is low, it is likely that some parents may have to or choose to send their children to private ECE services, which can represent heavy financial burdens (OECD, 2012b), and others may prefer to stay home, which can hinder increasing female labor force participation (OECD, 2011).

Affordability is therefore an important factor in ensuring all children have access to ECE, especially for low-income families. Fees for ECE can vary considerable both within and between countries. In some countries all ECE is provided free, in others it is heavily subsidized, and in yet others private funding and parent fees make up the majority of the funding. Local communities often finance ECE for younger children, while they share costs with the central level for older children. The private sector often plays a bigger role in ECE for younger children with more public funding for older children. The most common form of ECE financing found in all these studies is a combination of central and local funding for ECE, with local funding more significant for younger children. The ECES countries reflect this pattern of complex and variable funding for ECE, with some countries providing a free and universal entitlement from a young age and others expecting a significant parental (private) contribution.

Policy Issue 3

A complex mix of private/public funding characterizes ECE provision, and this can impact on access for some children and on setting sustainability and viability within the sectors.

Securing adequate funding for a high quality, affordable and accessible ECE system is a challenge for all eight of the ECES countries. In all the study countries, funding for ECE services is complex. There is usually a mix of private, voluntary and publicly-funded ECE provision, even where universal entitlement is secured and delivered largely through public provision. At ECED level, there is usually much more private, voluntary and community provision, with more publicly-funded provision at PPE level, particularly in the year before entry to primary education. The data also reveals that few providers are fully privately funded, with most private providers also receiving some level of government subsidy in order to support their viability, especially at PPE level. Both demand- and supply-side funding mechanisms are used by governments at ECED and PPE level to support the sustainability of ECE provision. The complexity of funding and the dependence on private funding, and therefore market forces, in some countries and particularly for younger children impacts directly on the sustainability and viability of providers from the private and voluntary sectors. The need for significant public investment in ECE services to sustain provision, secure the quality of services, and enhance participation is clearly demonstrated in the ECES countries.

Evidence from cross-national studies (EIU, 2012; European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/Eurostat, 2014; OECD, 2012; Pascal et al., 2012) reveals that in most countries, ECE is split into two separate phases according to age. The split system is the most common form of ECE structure, with provision delivered in separate settings for younger and older children. The age break is usually around three years old. The responsibilities for governance, regulation and funding are divided between different authorities. In contrast, in unitary systems, ECE provision for all children is organized in a single phase and delivered in settings catering for whole age phase. There is no break or transfer between institutions until children start primary schooling. In the ECES countries we found both split and unitary systems, but split systems continue to predominate.

Policy Issue 4

There is a persisting structural and organizational split between ECED and PPE, which means that systemic coherence within ECE and between ECE and primary schooling is lacking.

Four of the eight ECES countries have statutory entitlements to some level of ECED (under-threes) service for children, and six have statutory or universal non-mandatory entitlement for children to PPE services (pre-primary) during the final year before transfer to primary education. This reveals that ECE has become an established government responsibility in these countries. However, there continues to be a split in most countries in the organization, regulation, governance and delivery of services in both age phases. For example, a mix of national and subnational governance predominates for both ECED and PPE, but national level governance increases as provision moves towards the pre-primary year and transition to the schooling system. This suggests that, for younger children, there is more room for local or regional variation in the delivery of services.

The split within the ECE phase is also evident in the service delivery in the majority of study countries. Often there are different national and local bodies or ministries responsible for ECED and PPE, and there is a greater variety of types of setting at ECED level, including home-based provision. Pre-primary education settings are more often center-based and more often “school” linked in name, location and purpose. However, in three of the study countries (Estonia, Denmark and Italy) there is development toward a more integrated (unitary) birth to primary school provision.

The continued split in governance, system management, and service delivery between ECED and PPE challenges policymakers in all study countries to ensure effective communication, clarity of roles and responsibilities, and effective partnership working to ensure the governance and management system supports the development of a coherent ECE and care system from birth to primary school entry. Very few of the study countries have secured a full structural and systemic integration of ECE with later phases of education. However, this complexity and distributed system governance model may have strength in encouraging regional and local participation and autonomy within a national framework, and ensuring ECE services have the flexibility to meet diverse local needs.

Delivery Models and Providers

The delivery of ECE across the whole age phase is characterized by diversity and complexity, with different providers at different ages and different delivery models. This complexity in service delivery for children from birth to three has been pointed out in several policy studies (EIU, 2012; European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/Eurostat, 2014; OECD, 2012a) and reveals that the delivery model for ECE is very different to that for primary schooling or secondary schooling in most countries. The ECES countries provided detailed examples of this complexity and the range of delivery models and providers that inject choice and diversity into the system, but also complexity and sometimes inequity.

Policy Issue 5

A mixed economy of private, public and community sector ECE providers is common, with a diverse variety of setting types delivering ECE services. This provides choice but can lead to inequity in quality and access.

In all the ECES countries there are a variety of setting types delivering ECE services to children under three years old (ECED) and from three years up to primary school age (PPE). These include home-based and center-based services, and may be called crèches, kindergartens, nursery schools, nursery or kindergarten classes in primary schools, kids clubs, preschools, day care centers and integrated centers. In all of the study countries there is also a mix of private, public and community sector providers, particularly serving children under the age of three. This mixed economy often leads to a multiplicity of provider types and service delivery models, with different staffing, curricula and regulatory requirements. This can support choice and diversity of options for parents within and between the sectors, but can also lead to inequity in provision and quality for children.

Participation and Enrollment

It is well documented that many countries have significantly increased the proportion of children enrolled in ECE programs over recent years (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/Eurostat, 2014; OECD, 2012a). However, as the European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/Eurostat (2014) study indicated, in most countries the demand for ECE places is higher than their supply, especially for younger children, and often attendance of children under three years is very low. In contrast, enrollment in the year or two before starting primary education is usually very high. However, disadvantaged children generally have lower ECE participation rates, even if financial support is offered. Increasing the participation of children from disadvantaged backgrounds is a key priority of many governments. Support measures to enhance participation for disadvantaged families exist in most countries and the use of targeting strategies to reach children from low-income households, children with special needs or disability, and migrant children are common. Yet, despite these measures, achieving full enrollment of certain subgroups in the population remains a considerable challenge in many countries, with a few countries making real progress. The ECES countries reflect this mixed success in achieving high levels of enrollment and participation in ECE services.

Policy Issue 6

Enrollment in ECE for certain population subgroups remains a challenge, particularly for children from low-income families and children with special needs or disability.

The evidence from the study countries reveals the older the child, the higher the levels of enrollment in ECE, and in the last year before entry to ISCED 1, there is over 86% enrollment in all of the study countries, with pre-primary education becoming a universal entitlement in most. However, universal access to ECE services is not achieved in the majority of study countries, and this study found a mixed approach to the use of targeting strategies to enhance the participation levels of certain population subgroups. Some countries have adopted a universal and integrated approach to secure enrollment, and others have used targeting as a strategy to increase the engagement of certain subgroups, particularly children from low-income families and children with special needs or disability. Some countries appear to be much more successful in securing the participation of children from low-income families and children with special needs or disability than others. The tension between the policy options of offering funded universal and/or targeted ECE services is visible when considering the study countries and contrasting their success in securing children's participation and enrollment in services, especially for less advantaged children.

Supporting Quality in ECE

Recent studies (EIU, 2012; OECD, 2012a; World Bank, 2013) reveal that countries across the world are concerned about assuring the quality of ECE and are moving to regulate ECE and put in place stronger systems of accountability, usually through quality accreditation and inspection. It is clear that countries are at different stages in the development of quality assurance procedures. Some countries actively resist too much regulation, whilst others see it as a key priority to safeguard children's well-being and development. The ECES countries reflect these different approaches to quality assurance, and provide exemplification of a range of policy approaches to assuring and delivering quality services.

Policy Issue 7

Regulation and quality assurance of ECE services to secure, promote and develop quality are used differentially to secure standards which prevent the development of a coherent quality assurance system.

Governments in the ECES all aim to deliver high quality ECE and recognize that greater regulation may be needed to achieve this. All the study countries regulate their ECE services, with regulatory responsibilities being distributed between national and subnational bodies, indicating a desire to ensure all ECE services meet minimal standards. Some countries appear to regulate more than others, and some aspects of service delivery are more regulated than others, with the most regulated aspects overall being health and safety in service delivery, and securing child protection. The data suggests that inspection is used more extensively than

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accreditation in the study countries to assure quality services at both ECED and PPE levels, although, in the majority of countries, the two processes complement one another; the one being used more for authorization of setting quality and the other for monitoring setting quality. All the countries that have accreditation and inspection processes promote the results to inform the further development of quality in the setting and to ensure key bodies are aware of their quality credentials, as reflected in the reports. There is clear evidence in the study countries of a real attempt to be transparent and accountable to interested bodies and individuals through the use of the reports in development planning, quality improvement, performance management, knowledge creation and transfer, and also to acknowledge and celebrate documented achievements. However, the study suggests that the use of quality reports as a tool to support quality improvement rather than quality assurance could be more effectively used in some countries.

Research has consistently demonstrated that enriched, stimulating environments and high quality pedagogy are fostered by better qualified practitioners, and that better quality pedagogies facilitate better learning outcomes (OECD, 2012a). Qualifications are one of the strongest predictors of staff quality. It is important to note, however, that it is not the qualification level per se; quality is related to how much specialized and practical training is included in initial staff education, what types of professional development and education are available to and taken up by staff, and how many years of experience staff have accumulated. The European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/Eurostat (2014) study indicated that three different types of staff typically work as a team in center-based settings in Europe: educational staff, usually qualified to tertiary level (Bachelor's level), care staff with a minimum qualification at upper or post-secondary non-tertiary education; and auxiliary staff/assistants who are not qualified or have a minimum qualification at upper secondary level. Educational staff are usually employed in all settings for older children and are less common in settings for younger children. Some countries require a Master's qualification as minimum qualification to work with older children in ECE. Continuing professional development is less common as an obligation in settings catering for children under three years, whereas it is usually a requirement when working with older children. Recent studies (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/Eurostat, 2014; Pascal, & Bertram, 2012) have also shown that heads or leaders of ECE settings need relevant experience, but that few receive specific leadership or management training, although good leadership is now recognized as important in achieving high quality services.

A number of the ECES countries reflect a greater diversity in the types of practitioners working in ECE settings than other studies have indicated. The analysis also reveals a greater difference and complexity both within and between countries in staff qualifications, training and staff remuneration levels than other studies have indicated.

Policy Issue 8

The role, level of professionalism and qualifications of the ECE workforce are characterized by diversity and variability, and there are under qualified and poorly remunerated staff at all levels, particularly at leadership level.

The ECES countries reveal that the staff who work in ECE are characterized by their diversity of qualification, role and status. The study data illustrates the complexity in the staffing of ECE services, which varies by age phase, type of setting, setting provider (public or private), location, and professional role of staff. Many countries do not require graduates (ISCED Level 5 or above) to work at a senior level in ECED or PPE, although the qualification requirement for leaders, and those who work with older children, is usually higher. Continuing professional development is usually an optional requirement for staff and leaders. Specific training in leadership and management is rare. Salary levels vary considerably within the sector, depending on the type of setting, role and type of delivery contract offered. However, relatively low pay rates for some practitioners, particularly those working with younger children, reflect the lack of professional status and qualification level in some parts of the workforce.

Evidence from other studies (EIU, 2012; Eurydice/Eurostat 2014; OECD, 2012a) reveals that many countries set learning objectives related to children's progress and development, and issue official curriculum guidelines to help settings improve their provision. However, the curriculum guidelines are often for older children and not for children under three years. For younger children, the emphasis is often on the care and welfare of children rather than their education and development. Where the curriculum guidelines exist, they tend to include personal, social and emotional development, as well as language and communication skills, physical development and health. Literacy and numeracy often apply only for older children. Most countries also recommend the type of teaching approach, with a balance between adult- and child-led activities, and some underline the importance of free play. In most cases, despite the guidance, settings are free to choose their own curricula and methods.

The ECES countries reflect these policy choices, but several also have curriculum guidelines for younger children. The majority of countries also provide freedom for the practitioners in the settings to choose their own curriculum and pedagogic approach.

Policy Issue 9

ECE curriculum guidelines are common and reflect a broad range of learning objectives and pedagogic approaches, but need to be extended to the under-threes.

The evidence in the ECES suggests that national curriculum guidance has been developed for early childhood services in the majority of study countries, particularly for the older children (over three years), and that this is broad in scope and usually provides guidance on learning content, pedagogic approaches, learning goals and assessment. The guidance in all countries promotes a broad and balanced range of learning areas to be covered throughout the age phases, with no narrowing of curriculum focus as the child heads towards entry to primary schooling. The

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non-cognitive areas are well balanced with the cognitive areas at both age phases. Usually, no single pedagogic approach is promoted over others for either younger or older children, but rather a range of pedagogies are encouraged, including more progressive, play-based approaches, and more academic, formal, instructional approaches. This seems to suggest some choice and freedom for settings to develop their preferred approach.

Expectations for Child Outcomes

Other studies (EIU, 2012; European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/Eurostat, 2014; OECD, 2012a) have revealed that most countries regularly assess children's progress at setting level and pay special attention to the transition between ECE and primary education. The European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/Eurostat (2014) report suggests that countries do this mainly through continuous teacher/practitioner observation and not formal testing. In some countries school readiness, maturity and language skills are criteria for entering primary education and are assessed formally at this point. In the ECES countries, the evidence indicated that governments remain reluctant to formalize the assessment process for younger children and only few countries carry out national assessments of children during ECE.

Policy Issue 10

Expected ECE child outcomes are broad and include executive functioning and child well-being, but national assessments of ECE child outcomes are currently limited in scope and usage.

The ECES countries do not focus on a narrow range of children's learning outcomes, such as literacy and numeracy, in this phase of education, but rather take a broader view of children's learning and the outcomes that early education settings might support. These include cognitive and non-cognitive learning outcomes, such as socio-emotional development, executive functioning and child well-being.

Although ongoing assessment for learning is carried out in settings by practitioners, in the majority of study countries national and formal child assessments are not commonly conducted in this phase, particularly for children under the age of three years, but are more evident in the pre-primary phase. Assessments, when conducted, are used to capture a broad range of learning outcomes, which include cognitive development, executive function and social-emotional well-being, and are not narrowly focused on areas of "school readiness" such as literacy and numeracy. The methods of assessment used to capture children's learning and development in the study countries include practitioner observations, standardized tasks and standardized tests, with a mixture of methods prevalent. Child outcomes data may be reported to a wide group of recipients, each of whom potentially can use the data to inform the development of educative practice for young children in the home, in the setting, in the locality, region, and country as a whole, and in the mindset of the wider public. A range of reporting platforms are used, from ICT, internet websites and other mass dissemination mechanisms, to local, face-to-face interactions,

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documentation and feedback. The study countries illustrate the potential value of having child outcomes data at a national and subnational level to inform, evaluate and improve system performance, as well as at setting level to inform children's learning plans and setting development. However, there continues to be reluctance in some countries to collect and use child outcomes data for ethical, methodological, and administrative reasons. Policy options in this area need to be sensitively considered and explored, as both parents and practitioners hold strong views on the value of assessment at this young age.

Concluding Comments

This cross-national policy study reveals that, while some areas of ECE policy and system development appear to be very similar in the study countries, others remain very different and variable, both within and between countries, with government policy often supporting regional and local variation in service delivery, particularly for children under the age of three. The variety of providers, particularly at ECED level, that are identified in many of the study countries may also mean that governments are ensuring the continued existence of more local and culturally nuanced ECE services. For example, the broad based and individually focused curriculum and pedagogic models supported by government policies appears to sustain and reinforce differences in providers, encouraging openness to a variety of educational approaches and practices, and even to a wide range of child outcomes.

It is clear that there is no one way to secure ECE policy development and no one-size-fits-all approach. Countries have a range of different policy options open to them to achieve the overall goal of securing high quality ECE for all children. Depending on each country's context, there are different policy opportunities to be considered. However, the diverse set of policy choices and options in the eight study countries as presented in this report provides an invaluable in-depth account of available systemic policy choices, and the consequences of these choices for service quality, service delivery and children's participation. The report acknowledges that no one country has yet perfected its ECE provision, and further consideration at policy level about how to progress the achievement of high quality ECE for all children is needed in all countries. The set of policy issues identified should provide an agenda for further rich and informed ECE policy dialogues.

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